I am a design activist.

Cybil Weigel

My purpose is to create social, commercial, political, and public action through design.

The designer is not the sole source of meaning.

Lorraine Wild

"I'm rocking on your dime," says the panda bear. The bear is sitting at a bar, a beer and a cigarette in front of him. His flat silhouette appears on a t-shirt by Geoff McFetridge, a young designer based in Los Angeles. McFetridge and his slouchy, working-class panda convey the attitude of an increasingly influential set of designers who want to shape the content and conditions of the work they do. "I'm rocking on your dime," says the designer who sees the client as a source of capital for creating inventive work equipped with a cultural life’ (Lupton, ¶ 1-2). I believe this model was sufficient for its time, but I like to look at history and change it. Having applied for a multitude of grants in the past two years, I have realized there is little money for political work in times of war. People are not giving their money away, so I have taken the term “barter” into my own hands. Working with a select team of financially strained artists, designers, filmmakers and musicians; we hustle to make work with our own content. Content is found in outside communities, where being uncomfortable is underrated. We utilize our skills of street and strife to make design interventions in the social, commercial, political, and public worlds. For example, the team where I am producing has bartered with musicians to make music scores for our movies in return for us to produce a music video. We are promoting the musician in our work and he in turn is advertising us as makers of his video. Some of my
production team works full time design jobs, which require little thought. Half of their
day is spent making the work they have to do and the other half is spent on their own
work, which has our embedded content. Faster machines and intelligent minds make
work render faster, leaving time for projects with cultural content. There is power in
numbers with creators who act like foster families.

Typography is the interface of writing.
Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller

In “Illuminations” by Walter Benjamin he states “film is the art form that is in keeping
with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face” (Benjamin, 250).

Leave the back door unlocked.
Laurie Haycock Makela

While doing a ride along with a police department, I realized how my Canon GL2 made
me the everyday citizen reporting the heuristic sensibility of realm beyond the real, the
new grotesque. Reality has nothing to do with interest when we are bombarded with
reality programming that has nothing to do with the affects of Bush’s “No Child Left
Behind,” but rather the primetime reality of Botox and suppressed sexuality. Over
exploitation of the term “real” equates to numbness and acceptance, and a denial of the
truth. As I am looking at the back of the heads of two police officers I am wondering how
did I get myself into this position, clutching my camera as it were my “nine,” this is
where I understand the film term “run and gun.”

We all were pillagers.
Carin Goldberg

Benjamin is talking about my need to expose myself to this environment and later capturing it. See there is this fine line between open and closed, public and private, camera on and camera off. As I am encaged in the back of this police car, I think about Jane Jacobs in her writing for “Systems of Survival.” In chapter nine, “Armbruster on Systemic Moral Corruption” the story of the IK pops into my head as this metaphor for all of my subjects this term. My perception of them through two years of friendship informed me they were overall good people, but when I brought a camera into the arena and captured the details of their lives it made me sick. In Jacobs’ book the IK were hunters and gathers that only did so when needed. They had no need for a governmental system of organization and conformity because it was not part of their life experience. When the Kenya government decided to make their home a preserve and relocate them to a small area of land, it prevented their natural lifestyle. Forced to farm and colonize into small villages, they rebelled against the system by doing things such as eating planting seeds. The IK outsmarted the police with their many schemes and when food was scarce some of the women slept with law enforcement to eat. So this is called “naked human nature” and as I think quietly this is what it’s all about (Jacobs, 133-7).

Comfort is overrated.

Sheila Levrant De Bretteville

I want to talk about the social contrasts through video documentation: the assumed perception of the outside and the reality I am capturing from the inside. I am resoundingly in the piece having built trust and acceptance of my audience and later exposing my truth to my viewers. Building trust takes an intelligence of knowing how to
get into an environment where most would never willingly let someone enter. Having myself lived a life plagued with the passed on traits of drug addiction and poverty, capturing a child who is experiencing a similar plight puts me into the reincarnated frame. I find myself closer to my subject matter, closer to my content, and closer than my DP can get because I know all of their plights. Karma lives in those creators who have experienced struggles, but maybe it is God who allows these moments to be captured on camera. But my anarchist tendencies believe that it is not God but fate, or luck that brings these moments to my audience. It is a street knowledge that cannot be explained through texts or critical theory. It is a hustle. A ghetto dialectic through eye contact or a body movement that makes people feel assured that I’m “OK.”

The tool breeds impatience.

Tobias Frere-Jones

I slip into where my building friendships just for the fact to “get in” is something that requires a lot sleepless nights and white knuckles. Having my audience sign model releases ahead of time didn’t prepare me for the community judges I was about to face. Legally getting content is easy, but processing that information and dealing with a community’s critique of you as a maker is difficult. Their perception of me as a volunteer and as a friend changed into seeing me as a producer and sometimes camera operator when they were faced with this technology. Having a hidden camera is a technology I can not partake in. If I was “found out” it could mean my abrupt removal of trust and possibly myself. I don’t think seamless technology would make my documentation easier. Hidden is a synonym for a bug, which directly relates to an informant, a negative connotation that on the street could mean your death. A titanium and a camera is a class brand that makes
me the upper class Caucasian. I am neither nature nor nurture. I can not run away from this.

**Shun a world culture of stunning sameness.**

Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller

A ghetto mentality is something I grew up with and I can fake it as a friend, but ghetto and professional are oil and water, so when one of my subjects sees me in this new light they build this suspicion of doubt. They sometimes send angry all-caps emails and throw out the race card. Then they say I’m being a racist after two years of being their friends because they see that I’m talking about hush hush subjects and the easiest thing to associate me with is ignorance due to my lack of melanin. But living in some rough cites and being called a piece of white trash or white nigger I was used to this. When someone can’t put a finger on you, they demean you. Being hatched from a poor neighborhood and culture I am a breakable egg not suited for vinyl siding homes or whitebread suburbia. My father taught me to beware of men dressed in suits. Having a sister who smoked crack and me with my own demons my European heritage denied my sister and me as German; we were considered inferior. But having experienced this before, I put this in my toolbox right next to the splice tool in Final Cut Pro. I can easily edit this out knowing this is a part of my chronicle.

**Intrude on the consciousness of ordinary people.**

Michael Bierut

Capturing is about acting; I am a media narc who has a heroin habit in hibernation. Harvesting content is not about surfing the web it’s about becoming an embedded
designer with your subject matter. It is about feeling uncomfortable. It’s not about camouflage. It’s about participation and sometimes pretending you care. In an article we read earlier in the term about the architect who won the contract to build the World Trade Center memorial, Daniel Libeskind was talking about presenting his work. Libeskind said that through storytelling or what I call removing the titles sold the project. I am a social chameleon to the extent of the tool, the architecture of spreading the truth. With a camera or my DP, I am a silent observer; but as a friend I am a pretending caring volunteer who has no interest in teaching but only on the corruptiveness of the teaching system and the neighborhood, which fosters it. Acting, fumbling tapes, and even expressing my unintelligence is a way of getting into the back of a police car. It also is an easy way to be battered both verbally and physically. There is an invisible line between capturing and confiscation.

No risk, no damage.

Johanna Drucker

Telling the truth is something that requires the ability to be sued over, the ability to be arrested for and as I learned from my parents partaking in the civil rights and anti-war movements I realized that totting a sign and screaming was something I could not do. My parents had a purpose to carry the placards. I have decided to make the placards for design activism. Screaming in a crowd does not fulfill my need to be an activist, either does my experience plastering cities with my tag, which brands anonymity both in the isolation of an alley and in the closterphobia of a synonymous crowd. I get inspiration in hearing my father talk about throwing rocks at Strom Thurmond or converting a war supporter to the other side of the picket line. I believe a lot of my fellow peers need to
look back to move forward. I believe strong content is just as important as a strong maker. They need to work together in collectives. History has purpose for change. My father’s best friend is an Italian immigrant who lived in Brooklyn when it was not the cool Williamsburg. He has hepC from banging dope for decades, walks with a cane and is a sickly sixty. His gang tattoos used to amaze me when he lived with us, crossed out and faded they are important brands to me. His son is one of my best friends. Growing up we decided to change our parents’ life struggle. John helped me, taking care of me when I used too much, when no one wanted to carry me. He is a navy seal graduate who swam away from his past. Little Jonnie pushes me to get all this done. His spirit keeps me in school to this day. Seeing my parents’ friends, who fought for what they believe in despite social hatred, gives me hope. It’s a way of life, to say something and live it. I have no fear of putting my name to something that could cause controversy and an unwavering commitment. Taking action by making action is my only option into doing a media intervention.

Let reason take a leave of absence.

Stephen Doyle

A couple of weeks ago, Bran Ferren from Applied Minds said that its not about the railway business its about the transportation business. He made me think about getting to my purpose for being a creative intellectual. Sometimes specializations hold creators back from solving serious social issues through collaborations or changes in media types. He also stated that a true creator has struggled, I haven’t heard that since I’ve been in CA. When 911 hit I had an identity breakdown on top of a nervous breakdown, my east coast design collaborative lost a lot of friends and family, a close friend of mine lost both of her
parent’s while she shook in my arms. We dropped the label designer and became political activists. It was like a creative war was ignited the evening of the 11th against our government, we brainstormed and made for weeks. Ellen Lupton lived on Bolton St. and I was on Park Ave. three streets away in Baltimore; she rallied all of her design family together and made us go to NYC. She told us that we should face our fears, and create through this smoldering experience. I created a series of design that was shown at Columbia and produced a documentary film on top of countless posters and tags. As activists on the east coast we bombed our brands everywhere, our creative frustration was explosive. We protested against the police who were accusing us of being terrorists for bombing anti-war posters and graff tags. We saw a lot of anti-Muslim violence and used our creative endeavors to protect our friends. “The initiation of FBI investigations of law-abiding Americans based on tips that they hold controversial views has become all too common since September 11” (Chang, 95). On the east coast, Ellen Lupton taught me to embrace my shortcomings as design intuitions or possible leads for content. I cannot deny the design tactics I was instilled with, this is who I am. You can be a designer and an activist or musician. You can minor in a lifestyle, and not hide it in the closet. I don’t just want to be a maker. I want to be a producer of content. You can make and lead. You can make. You can lead. Some people participate in movements, some people make their own. I commit only to my work and to those people who I choose to collaborate with, my family. I am more than just a designer. When Bran finished, I almost cried because for me it’s not about the design business it’s about the communication business. See I am a creator who always wants to be in charge of my aesthetic destiny. When sitting in front of my silver surround sound Sony home theater I cried a couple of months ago when I heard Michael Moore’s 2003 commentary on the new DVD release of “Roger & Me.” He made
a crude remark about how he was hiding in a bunker in Manhattan and giving this commentary right after he won the best documentary from the Academy for “Bowling for Columbine.” His commentary for example, is about how he pretended to be a news crew to capture the closing of a GM plant in Michigan and how inexperience often comforted his subjects because they had no idea of his end product and how monumental the content would be. His honesty brought forth observations that go through my mind every week as I am frantically trying to tell this schizophrenic narrative. Michael Moore stated in his commentary that he was a shy overweight man more interested in getting the information than what his audience thought of him. But I would really like to say that very few creators are willing to take themselves into an unknown territory and take sexual innuendos and racial slurs to make. I make to tell the truth, despite the attacks to my character.

Art is boring.

Marlene McCarty and Don Moffett

Making out with media has no interest to me, experiencing my subjects and their social contrast is my intention. In the public bathroom arena of happenings, this phenomenon is considered “media art” which is something I can critique having once been confused and trapped in the video projections of the past. In Lev Manovich’s, “The Language of New Media” he states, “…many installations can be thought of as dense multimedia information spaces” (page 266). I beg to differ having participated in this nonsensical world before and having viewed it again at “The Armory’s” show, ”Syzygy” I once again felt queasy as I tripped over a large catfish. There is no dense information space in a one-channel art video or a psychedelic screen saver that reminds me of the atrocities that is
packaged with iTunes. There is very little thought or risk taken by the maker; it can be easily labeled as art. You can’t compare media art to Yahoo, eBay, or the architectural structure of Wal-mart’s genius to entrap its customers into the inventoried Super Size culture running to Jenny Craig every week. The club culture of the piercing nineties fueled flesh stretching behaviors where I thought I could make a living touring my video art in clubs throughout the world living on Sweet & Low and soda crackers. Alan Kaprow left his scars on an art history I was trying to mutilate with gages of steel and minimalist movies set to techno.

Film is a lie that we like.

Norman Klein

We believe everything in a square. Editing is a design tactic that I like to utilize to express content. I don’t want my audience to have the freedom to read my information like a book. My narrative is an authenticity found in the every day filming of a community where I’m expressing their message or lack of voice. Assembly is not a choose your own adventure book because there are reasons for the juxtapositions of people, statements, and music tempo. It is to express purpose. People don’t read anymore and a film is faster than waiting for the elevator of computer interaction. It’s very hard for every day people to enjoy the fortitudes of the designer. Most low-income people in this country can’t afford the luxuries of technology. As designers we forget that we are spoiled with the affordances of communication and the tools to make. Kids who “cop” know the street value of a video camera, but as designers I think we forget the instantaneous wealth of this media type. I’ve been approached and chased by youth wanting to steal my camera, but I always run guarding my content over the tool. When
you put yourself in a war zone you will be fired on, especially if the community is closely watching you. I want to make my content known, for example the lack of communication of the audience I’m filming.Privileged people already have enough old money to advance their culture. An interface that reflects high culture is meant only for those who have the technology and knowledge to view it. I’m looking to create documentaries that can be viewed in mass scales to create change within communities. I’ve learned through filming that people don’t talk about issues because of fear and cultural tradition. I am tying issues together through editing, for discussion and possibly change to happen within communities. There is also is predisposed stereotype that only negativity occurs in hopelessness. I am proving this wrong. I want to show other communities to look for powers of examples outside of their comfort zones, that proves the mainstream media wrong. Design activism occurs outside of the conformity of the computer square. It encompasses all media types and makers best suited for that particular intervention.

I’d rather be the Beatles than Philip Glass.

Paula Scher

Shaking in fear and holding my camera while being squished in the back of a police car is disturbing, but I’m used to it.
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